



United States Mission to the OSCE

First Session OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims

As delivered by Randall J. Brandt
Cordoba, October 9, 2007

Mr. Moderator,

First, on behalf of the United States, I want to say Ramadan Mubarak to our Muslim friends here today who are observing Ramadan. Millions of American Muslims across our country are joining their brothers and sisters in observing these holy days.

We welcome the convening of this conference, as the problem of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims is an issue across the OSCE region, and around the world. The United States strongly supports combating all forms of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims. In fact, at the recent OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, the United States urged many delegations, in all parts of the OSCE region, to allow for greater religious freedom for Muslims and to address the social exclusion of Muslims through laws and regulations.

The U.S. Government has worked tirelessly to ensure that persons of all faiths, including Muslims, can freely enjoy their human right to freedom of religion. We raise these concerns with both our allies and others, within the OSCE and without. The U.S. Government's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom addresses these concerns in detail within the OSCE and around the world.

In the OSCE region, for instance, the free practice of Islam is severely constrained in different ways – from overt prejudice to non support for structures that allow religious observance. In parts of the Caucasus and throughout Central Asia, Muslim communities have great difficulty operating mosques not controlled or sanctioned by the state and in some cases this results in problematic penalties for this activity. Sometimes in Europe, registration systems often disproportionately burden small Muslim religious communities, while some countries' legal systems limit or ban the wearing of Islamic religious dress.

Our own record, of course, is not perfect. However, our senior government leaders have made public statements condemning intolerance and bigotry. Speaking at the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. on September 17, 2001, President George W. Bush made it clear that violence and intimidation should not be tolerated, stating that "those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don't represent the best of America, they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior."

We also take concrete actions. The U.S. Department of Justice has investigated hundreds of incidents involving violence or threats of violence against individuals perceived to be Muslim, or of Arab, Middle Eastern, or South Asian descent. Working with its partners in state and local governments, our Justice Department has pursued many of these cases, and has also filed lawsuits to protect the rights of vulnerable individuals in the context of employment, housing, and religious discrimination.

By encouraging members of groups to report abuses, and then taking action and pursuing investigations and prosecutions, we send critical messages: (1) Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, Sikh, and South Asian Americans are entitled to the same rights and liberties as all citizens; (2) illegal discrimination has no place in a civilized society, and will not be tolerated; and (3) in the United States, there is a legal process for addressing discriminatory acts. Our expectation should be nothing less than equal justice for all.

We believe that our ethnic diversity and laws and tradition of religious pluralism are fundamental strengths. As President Bush recently said “the freedom to worship is so central to America’s character that we tend to take it personally when that freedom is denied to others.”

The true test of religious freedom is whether persons and organizations of all faiths, including minority religions, can fully enjoy their religious liberties. At the same time, while we discourage actions that are offensive to particular religious traditions, we also believe that basic freedoms require the ability for all persons to critique religious practice without fear of reprisal. Thus, religious anti-defamation laws, even when well intended, hinder fundamental religious freedoms, and limit free speech. They are not in harmony with the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent OSCE agreements, like the Vienna Concluding Document, which have created some of the most sophisticated commitments protecting the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief.

In conclusion, Mr. Moderator, we look forward to this dialogue about how we can effectively combat discrimination and intolerance against Muslims and how we can work with Muslim communities to be tolerant of each other’s differing religious traditions and practices as well. We need to ensure that all of our citizens, regardless of their religion, are able to live their lives free of discrimination.